

“Celtic Oddities”: Patterns of Cracker Culture in the American South

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People forget that there were two Irish immigrations into America.

(Padraic Colum, Irish poet,
novelist, and biographer)

1. Preliminary observations

Besides making an attempt to sort out the confusing conceptuality of Celticism in American culture, this discussion is primarily aimed at exploring the significance of the Scotch-Irish presence and impact in shaping the larger culture of the South. The Scotch-Irish immigrants, who originally settled in bulk in the Southern Appalachian mountains (and who represented anti-Anglo-Norman values), took with them a plethora of cultural patterns, lifestyles, and attitudes that appear to have proven both enduring and influential in the soil of Dixie. These can be identified as having impacted on such staple texts of the Southern literary culture as the works of the nineteenth-century humorists of the Old Southwest, William Faulkner (himself the product of a strong Scottish background), Erskine Caldwell (perhaps the archetypal “cracker” author¹), Ellen Glasgow, and so on. Indeed, it can be safely argued that some of the modernist devices associated with Faulkner’s works can be traced back to the folkways and other Celtic strains of the mountain cultures of both Scotland and the Appalachians. The paper also comments on relevant schools of thought—the Celtic Myth and the relatively recent (early 1980s) Celtic-Southern Thesis—which claim that the majority of Southern culture is not of English but of Scotch-Irish origin.

Celtic studies, however, is a contested terrain. It is also a conceptual minefield in the sense that the relevant labels and designations being slippery, statements—even ostensibly uncontested statistical data—often require a creative approach to interpretation. For instance, the terms “Irish” or “Irish American” do not, or rather should not, normally include the Scotch-Irish! What is even more confusing to the student of Celtic studies is that sometimes they do, sometimes they do not. Sorting out Irishness and Celticity can be a problem, and precise ethnic facts are difficult to come by. In addition, widely used sources, such as Ronald Takaki’s *A Different Mirror*,

a celebrated monograph of ethnic America, does not even mention the Scotch-Irish. I may also add at this point that half of the American population cannot identify its ethnicity at all to the census surveyors.

The enigma of the apparent and unique invisibility of the cultural roots of millions of Celtic people has driven scholars to want to scrutinize and conceptually sort out the hyphenated (and misleading) name *Scotch-Irish*, its rival designations, and its most essential cultural connotations. There exist, of course, further enigmas. For instance, I have just mentioned “invisibility.” But how can an immigrant group be “invisible” if its members could send fourteen Presidents to the White House? Or think of well-known names and people: what do the following personalities have in common? They are all Scotch-Irish: John C. Calhoun, Andrew Carnegie, Alexander Hamilton, Andrew Jackson, “Stonewall” Jackson, William McKinley, John D. Rockefeller, Zachary Taylor, Marilyn Monroe, James Stewart, Jack Lemon, Mel Gibson, John Malkovitch, Ginger Rogers, Mia Farrow, Bill Clinton, Woodrow Wilson, Davy Crocket, Mark Twain, George W. Bush (and Obama, through his mother); all these people and millions more boast Scotch-Irish bloodlines. Political publicists often remark that virtually all Americans could claim the Scotch-Irish as their forbears. Primarily because this group has had a lasting influence on American society.

There is obviously more to this Dixie culture than folk festivals, whiskey-making, or playing the dulcimer. The immigrants from the Lowlands of Scotland, who arrived in North America via Ulster, stamped the South with its enduring traits. The ethnic group that at a certain historical juncture before the American Revolution so easily melted into American society permeated the South with indelible features. It is indubitable that a Celtic-Southern perspective can offer new insights for a better understanding of the culture of Dixie. Chances are that even simple, routinized Southern formulations may be worth more than just passing scrutiny. When, for instance, we read the sentence “It was Yankeeified to hurry” in one of the widely promoted CW + R (Civil War and Reconstruction) Southern epic novels, we are likely to find that we can easily tune in to the ideological wave-length of the simple utterance. If, however, we are in the position to learn about Celtic, especially Scotch-Irish, views pertaining to the philosophy of leisure and acquisitiveness—thus assume a contrastive, “Celtic” versus “English” understanding of cultural difference—we are soon to see room for added meanings.

2. "A Somewhat Awkward Name"

Simply because the concrete meanings of "cracker" itself are likely to yield a heterogeneous cluster, it is not readily obvious, on first observation, what the phrase "cracker culture" in my title might signify. Thus, which of the following explanations is the most likely candidate: salted biscuits? a whip? explosive candy? somebody who makes flippant remarks? a person who boasts? The answer is: none of these.² We are closer to the truth if we contemplate the regional and geographical contexts of this lexical item as these relate to parts of the south-eastern United States—that is, the "Old Southwest"—where "cracker" is, among other things, a racial epithet used by black Americans as a contemptuous term for a Southern white. Indeed, as Charles Reagan Wilson of the University of Mississippi helpfully adds, "[m]igrant southern blacks took their contempt for 'crackers' with them to northern cities in the 20th century, and today the term is often used in ghettos in referring to all prejudiced whites" (1132). Further, somewhat more than three decades ago our volatile lexical item became a term of ethnic pride for some southern whites. The election of Jimmy Carter of Plains, Georgia, to the White House in 1976 led to media stories about Cracker Chic and *Crackers* was used as the title of a book (by humorist R. Blount) about Southerners and the Carter era.

"Cracker" in this discussion will mean an impoverished white person of parts of the south-eastern United States. As such, it continued to be a contemptuous term for well over two centuries: indeed, it used to be vaguely synonymous with "hillbilly," "redneck," and other not too polite designations also including "honky" (or "honkie"), "peckerwood," "linthead," "doughface," "shit kicker," "raw-gum chewer," and "hoosier." Indeed, the further unflattering connotations of the term—as well as the various special appellations by which they were contemptuously known in different parts of the South; such as, "dirt-eaters," "clay-eaters," "piney-woods people," "tallow-faced gentry," "sand-hillers," and the like; may account for the fact that today scholars of the Scottish diaspora in Scotland are seldom enthusiastic about claiming kinship with the poor whites of Dixie. Yet, in recent Celtic Studies parlance the word is slowly being redeemed of its negative implications. Chances are that in the future this definition will have a reference to Celticity. In the present context, thus, "cracker" will mean a Southerner with Celtic roots, most often a Scotch-Irish person.

Historically, the relative social rank of the members of cracker communities can be seen best gauged through the sociological seizmograph

of fiction, that is, through “live” confrontations delineated in encyclopedic novels of the CW+R type, which portray durative psychosocial tensions among the respective Dixie communities and which are likely to offer a valid social register of reference. Such a fictional authentication can be found, for instance, in Margaret Mitchell’s epic of Southernness and of Catholic Irishness, *Gone With the Wind*. In Mitchell’s fictional world the relative social rank of the crackers is one notch above “the real white trash” (20) such as the Slatterys “and riffraff like them” (68) and below the MacIntoshes who

were Scotch-Irish and Orangemen and, had they possessed all the saintly qualities of the Catholic calendar, this ancestry would have damned them forever in Gerald’s eyes. True, they had lived in Georgia for seventy years and, before that had spent a generation in the Carolinas; but the first of the family who set foot on American shores had come from Ulster, and that was enough for Gerald. (51)³

The notion of who is and who is not a cracker is put to further semantic tests in scenes describing how the preparation for the war is heating up in Clayton County. In the beginning, the Troop is recruited exclusively from the sons of planters, a gentlemen’s outfit. “But rich planters were few . . . and, in order to master a full-length troop, it had been necessary to raise more recruits among the sons of small farmers, hunters in the backwoods, swamp trappers, Crackers and, in a very few cases, even poor whites, if they were above the average of their class” (21). Again, in the crowd at Gerald’s funeral in chapter 40, Scarlett’s eyes seek out mercilessly the figure of the one-time prominent (“quality”) Cathleen Calvert Hilton: “Scarlett saw with amazement that her percale dress had grease spots on it and her hands were freckled and unclean. There were even black crescents under her fingernails. There was nothing of quality folks about Cathleen now. She looked Cracker, even worse. She looked poor white, shiftless, slovenly, trifling” (699). Yet, Scarlett is not resolved to stick to the predictable social cliché; indeed, she is ready to compromise on another cracker, Will, by letting him marry into her family.

Scarlett thought of Will, lank, unimpressive, mild, eternally chewing a straw, his whole appearance deceptively devoid of energy, like that of most Crackers. He did not have behind him a long line of ancestors of wealth, prominence and blood. . . . Will had not been to college. In fact, four years in a backwoods school was all the education he had ever had. He was

honest and he was loyal, he was patient and he was hard working, but certainly he was not quality. . . . Scarlett's heart failed a beat when she thought how close Tara had come to going back to wilderness. Between herself and Will, they had done a good job. . . . Yes, Will was something the lord had provided. (695-96)

Will never says anything about his family, neither does Mitchell provide a genealogy. His surname, however, James P. Cantrell suggests, is probably Gaelic.⁴ That Mitchell has Benteen save Tara's land after the aristocratic Ashley Wilkes fails and then has him join the family reveals her facing post-Civil War Southern realities true to historical fact. What is even more revealing for our purposes is that the presence of the crackers in Mitchell's novel is convincing if not formidable. If we round up the whole relevant membership and also add to this group of fictional characters, for instance, Scarlett's fierce-looking body-guard Archie, who "was mountain born" (741) and who was also born with a gun in his hand, we have solid showing in the novel from an immigrant group that is referred to in the text by an ethnic identifier—Scotch-Irish—only three times.

Grady McWhiney, one of the principal authorities on Celtic ways in the American South, quotes a colonial official from 1766, who informed the Earl of Dartmouth in the following way: "I should explain to your Lordship what is meant by Crackers; a name they have got from being great boasters; they are a lawless set of rascalls on the frontiers of Virginia, Maryland, the Carolinas, and Georgia, who often change their abode" (*Cracker* xiv). Scattered references throughout the eighteenth century describe the crackers as "slovenly people," "rootless people," "rude and nomadic, excellent hunters but indifferent farmers" (xv). With time, contemporaries and scholars alike usually equated crackers with poor whites, and sometimes it also came to be applied to mountaineers and other small farmers. Thus, in the end, frustrating the careful class distinctions that, for instance, Mitchell was trying to maintain, cracker came to mean any member of the poor white caste in the South. In this fashion, when she is describing the funeral crowd, she goes out of her way to make certain who is and who is not a cracker. The small farmers came from far across the river; the crackers came from the backwoods; there was also a scattering of swamp folk. Mitchell makes it very clear that the swamp men and their women ("their bare feet sunk in the soft red earth, their lower lips full of snuff. Their faces beneath their sunbonnetts were sallow and malarial-looking but shining clean and their freshly ironed calicoes glistened with starch" [699]) did not make the

grade to be admitted to the cracker class. But observers, both antebellum and postbellum, often failed to distinguish between crackers and poor whites. "All poor whites were Crackers," observes McWhiney, "even though not all Crackers were poor whites" (*Cracker* xvi).

3. How to be Irish without actually being one?

The notion of the Celtic origins of the Southern white multiculture is one of the major, but controversial, theories explaining the early development of Dixie. In this debated field, the representatives of the Celtic-Southern Thesis and the advocates of the "Celtic Myth" have been up against the supporters of the "Cavalier Myth" and its satellites which evoked apparently significant components of English squirarchy. They were also opposed to those adherents who were the spokesmen of the idea that the bulk of transplanted Englishmen was the determining factor of ethnic sectionalization. As James G. Leyburn has remarked, "[t]he tendency of our history books has been to make us see colonial history as the product of transplanted Englishmen. . . . Few schoolbooks make a child aware of non-English 'first Americans'" (1). Again, predicated upon a North versus South opposition, and in view of more recent findings, it seems convincing to accept the argument that "[t]he ethnic polarization of the American colonies, with the English dominating New England and the Celts . . . dominating the South, was one factor making the Old South distinctive" ("Celtic South" 1131). Forrest McDonald and McWhiney's brief yet firm concluding statistical remarks speak volumes: "By the end of the antebellum period, the South's white population was three-quarters or more Celtic, New England and the upper Middle West were three-quarters or more English, and the border areas were mixed" (1131).

The major actors of this massive demographic shift in the South were the most prominent group of non-English first Americans. I will forgo the historical detail and reference and say only that the ancestors of these people had gone, in the century after 1610, from the Lowlands of Scotland across the twenty-mile channel to the northern province of Ireland (that is, Ulster) as a result of a political experiment undertaken by England. It was called the Plantation of Ulster, and it was simply one of England's many attempts to solve "the Irish problem." The Scots who were invited (along with English Protestants) by King James to settle Ulster and subdue its natives were thus the first Scotch-Irish. Ironically, although in Ireland they had been considered Scottish foreigners by both the native Irish and the English Ascendancy, Anglo-Americans now nearly always defined them as

Irish. The Ulster experience was a fitting preparation for pioneering in America.

A great deal of confusion has been generated simply by the awkward term “Scotch-Irish” itself, which seems to suggest “Scottish Gael” to those with some, but not a detailed, knowledge of the situation (Cunningham 79). The appellation *Scotch-Irish American*, though a misnomer, refers to *Irish Presbyterian* and other Protestant dissenters from the province of Ulster who immigrated to North America primarily during the colonial era, and their descendents. The Great Migration from Ulster to America took place in five major waves between 1717 and 1775. An estimated 250,000 arrived in America during the colonial era. Some scholars also include the 150,000 Ulster Protestants who immigrated to America during the early nineteenth century (Cunningham 77). Most of the Scotch-Irish were descended from Scottish and English families. People in Great Britain or Ireland that are of a similar ancestry usually refer to themselves as *Ulster Scots*, with the term “Scotch-Irish” used only in North America. As to relative ratio of population bulk, while an estimated 36.3 million Americans (11.9% of the total population) reported “Irish” ancestry in 2008, an additional 1.2% (3.5 million people) identified more specifically with “Scotch-Irish” ancestry. This is relevant for our purposes to see that the Ulster Scots represented sufficient bulk and settlement concentration to make a cultural impact.

In a loose sense, the ethnic identifier “Scotch-Irish” generally refers to settlers who were born or resided in Ireland’s Ulster province but whose earlier origins (whether personal or ancestral) were in Scotland. They have also been called by over a dozen further identifying tags, with the trail of names and appellations over the times providing telling—or not so telling—records of territorial relocations, itineraries, and religious background. As a result of an extended historical accumulation, the very same people have been called “Scots-Irish,” “Ulster Scots,” “Ulster Irish,” “Irish Presbyterians,” “Presbyterian Scots,” “Scots-Irish Presbyterians,” “Protestant Irish,” “Northern Irish,” “early Ulster (immigrants),” and a few more. These appellations are telling identifiers in the sense that 1) they refer to *American* settlers exclusively; the term is almost never used in any European Celtic or non-Celtic community; 2) “Scotch-Irish” and its variants were coined to distinguish the people they have been made to refer to from the “real” or “other” Irish, that is, from the “Irish natives,” or the “native Irish,” that is, the “indigenous” and predominantly Catholic “Irish-Irish.” It seems that the most economical way of defining the Scotch-Irish

is this: the American descendents of Presbyterian Scots who settled in Ulster (modern-day Northern Ireland) during the seventeenth century. 3) The two groups—the Catholic native Irish (the Irish-Irish) and the Scotch-Irish (the Celtic Irish), respectively, had little interaction in America. They arrived in the New World not only in different locations and different times but also in different centuries!

It should be remembered, however, that they were dissenters, Protestant Presbyterians, Lowland Scots. From an American point of view they were the early Ulster emigrants because they migrated in considerable numbers to the American colonies during the half century before the Revolutionary War. It is essential to remember that the Scotch-Irish were *not* Irish and they were not Catholics. The term “Scotch-Irish” is strictly an American nomenclature, an Americanism. In England and Ireland the same people are called Ulster Scots, which is much less confusing. These people migrated to North America primarily during the colonial era. How many people? An estimated quarter of a million. We do not have to be experts in demographic trends and mathematics to figure out that today millions of Americans have Scotch-Irish ancestors, for when the US gained its independence, perhaps one out of every ten persons was Scotch-Irish. Ironically, one of the lessons of the Scotch-Irish experience is how you can be Irish without actually being one.

Yet it has been proven without any doubt that next to the English they were the most numerous of all colonists. Some historians suggest that they were “archetypal” Americans in the sense that their attitudes and ideals, virtues and vices, proved to be common national characteristics of nineteenth-century Americans. It is another matter that few descendants among these millions know much about their ancestors—about what the hyphenated names imply, where the original Scotch-Irish stock came from and why, or what part this vigorous folk played in early American history.

The whole itinerary led from the Scottish Lowlands to Appalachia and beyond. It was a busy route, for it has been proven without any doubt that next to the English the Scotch-Irish were the most numerous of all colonists. Whether we judge the presence of this Celtic group as a demographic factor or as statistical data, there is no denying the fact that indeed the mathematics is impressive. In 1790 Scots constituted a fifth to a third of the white population in the Southern states, and most of these were doubtless Scotch-Irish. This was true even amidst a minor spontaneous campaign of Anglo-Saxonization, as in the case of prominent Southern personalities such as Andrew Jackson and John C. Calhoun; they were early

embraced as “Southern Anglo-Saxons.” Incidentally, the Scotch-Irish provided more than two dozen generals and about a third of the revolutionary army during the War of Independence. President Theodore Roosevelt said of the Scots-Irish that in the Revolutionary war, the fiercest and most ardent Americans of all were the Presbyterian Irish settlers and their descendents. All in all, a quarter of a million Scotch-Irish people emigrated in the eighteenth century from Ulster to the New World, with most of them arriving in Pennsylvania. If they experienced hostility, they experienced it for only a brief time for practically all of them pushed as quickly as possible to the cheap lands of the back country, where, out of sight, they no longer offended the sensibilities of the English colonists by their “oddities.”

The American career of a famous Scotch-Irish personage, Andrew Jackson, tends to reinforce the above pattern. The story of the first “log cabin” president and of his immediate family began in Northern Ireland in 1765. The parents, Andrew and Elizabeth Jackson, had recently traveled to America with relatives from the north of Ireland. Andrew Junior was born on March 15, 1767, in a backcountry Carolina settlement (Waxhaw Settlement). There were four brothers, the sons of Hugh Jackson, a well-to-do linen weaver. While still back in Ulster, each of the brothers occupied a “large Farm” and paid the usual rents to the “Lord of the Soil.” Each was known for his “hospitality” and “strict adherence and attachment to the faith as professed by the Kirk of Scotland” (Remini 2). Their ancestors had crossed from Scotland to Northern Ireland after the army of William III defeated James II at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. Though they had been born in Northern Ireland, it was reported that the Jackson brothers preserved “a great portion of Scottish phraseology and Dialect” (2). If this was true (some historians have doubted the source of this information) it would seem to indicate that these Scotch-Irish were a tightly-knit, insulated group (2). Once in the New World, they joined the Scotch-Irish migration south from Pennsylvania to the outlying southern frontier. Jackson’s parents brought one son of two and another of five months from Ireland. Andrew, the youngest son, was the only child born in America (Rogin 39). The most popular hero of his time, a man of action and an expansionist, Jackson by 1821 stood on the threshold of the White House. In the election of 1828 he easily defeated his opponent, John Quincy Adams, and served two terms in the White House.

4. Celtic virtues and “oddities”: Scotch-Irish traits and values

The Celts who settled in the South took with them their *non-English* or *non-Anglo-Saxon* ways. These *anti-Anglo-Norman* ways had coalesced into a value system that the Celtic communities carried across the Atlantic and which was markedly different from that of the English who settled New England and Tidewater Virginia. What is more, the Celts readily imposed these traditions upon their neighbors. “Only a few settlers in the antebellum South, such as determined Yankees and isolated Germans as well as the enslaved Africans, managed to avoid acculturation into the prevailing Celtic cultural patterns” (McDonald 1132).

According to common wisdom, schoolbook mythology and the attendant popular iconography, the North versus South dichotomy used to be best incarnated in conventional stereotyped cultural signifiers. Statistically, the best-known classic Northern iconic definers were, for instance, the *Puritan* and the *Yankee*: the sober-garbed and steeple-hatted *Puritan*—usually pictured on his way to church with his Bible in one hand and his bell-mouthed musket in the other—and the *Yankee*: most often represented as a tall, loose-jointed figure with sallow cheeks, a sharp nose, and an eye to the main chance. The *woods ranger* (in coonskin cap and fringed buckskin breeches, carrying a long rifle; sometimes known to Northerners as Natty Bumppo) can be regarded as the third pillar of this masculine triumvirate. Contrasted with these stands an outcrop of equally well-known Southern images, such as, for instance, the plumed *Virginia cavalier* (spurring madly through the forest to defend his honor and rescue a damsel in distress), *backwoods booster* (sometimes known as Davy Crockett), the Southern colonel, and a dozen or so others. The didactic, even if not statistical, usefulness of these imagological stereotypes is still valid.

A similar construction of opposites has been expressed in the conventional claim that the English dominated New England and the Celts dominated the South. The Celtic immigrants from Ulster certainly contributed to the making of America. The Scotch-Irish settlers made superb frontiersmen in early colonial America. They are credited with consolidating the western frontier line; they were the western squatters on the outer edge of European civilization in North America.

However, a closer look at their frontier expertise would somewhat refute Frederick Jackson Turner’s idea of how the newly arrived immigrants developed their celebrated “Americanisms.” In *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, Jackson mentions the Scotch-Irish twice. He fails to note, however, that there was a substantial difference between these Celts

and the other immigrant groups. The Scotch-Irish were warlike herdsmen; they also represented a warrior culture and, consequently, were adept Indian fighters and frontiersmen par excellence. The simple fact is that the Scotch-Irish took the most decisive skills with them from Europe. Their experiences over the previous few centuries—their unceasing warfare with the Highland Scots and the “wild Irish” in Ulster—prepared them for that role (Cunningham 85).

Rodger Cunningham also makes an interesting observation regarding the “roughness” of the Scotch-Irish toward the native population: “they were not only prone to settle on Indian lands illegally, but also apt to make overreactive or totally unprovoked attacks on native villages” (84). This was not simply “frontier behavior,” he adds, because “their aggressiveness conspicuously exceeded that of their white neighbors, notably the Germans, many of whom accompanied them southward” (85). Cunningham’s explanation of the reasons for this overreactive pattern of conduct—oft pointed out as present in Andrew Jackson’s infamous decisions before and after the Indian removal—echo a large number of similar explanations: “[t]he basic reason for this aggressiveness is not far to seek, and has been pointed out more than once: the Scotch-Irish were simply transferring to the ‘wild’ Indian the habits which they had formed in a hundred or more years of combat with the ‘wild’ Irishman, and in centuries of combat with the ‘wild’ Highlander before him” (85).

The Celtic immigrants from Ulster have been characterized as a vigorous yet leisurely folk given to clear preferences. The Scotch-Irish lifestyle was based on open-range animal husbandry and a minimum of crop raising. Therefore, they preferred herding to tillage, telling tall tales to accomplishing urgent chores, yarnspinning and listening to reading and writing. To their non-Celtic neighbors—the early German and English immigrants mainly—they appeared at once clannish and hospitable, oriented to the extended family rather than toward an abstract community. They have been said to be violent and tending toward extremes of apathy or enthusiasm in politics and religion. The Celtic culture was also reputed to be “hostile to literacy” (Sowell 19), and there is no telling whether the “wild” Irish were more hostile. While these Celts were praised for their frontier performance and patriotism, perhaps even for their uninhibited gaiety, they were condemned for their apparent laziness, improvidence, drunkenness, their lack of orderliness. The Germans, yes, they were noted for their order and orderliness, for their steady work, frugality. The Scotch-Irish were just the opposite—quick-tempered, hard drinking, working intermittently,

saving little, washing little, and constantly involved in feuds among themselves or with the Indians (Sowell 52).

Moreover, acquisitiveness and the attendant virtues of a strict work ethic were clearly not regarded as part of the Celtic life ethos. As a result, the Scotch-Irish were seen as improvident and disdainful of accumulating worldly goods. The Celts tended to be unacquisitive—"personal ambition," McWhiney is telling us, "trying to make and save money all ranked low on the Celtic and southern scales of creditable activities"—and egalitarian: "Celts and Southerners were less likely to judge people by their wealth than were Englishmen and Northerners" (*Cracker* 265).

McWhiney also adds a comment, which, if used as a criterion of judgment, will convincingly show that Faulkner's Sutpens in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) are typically Celtic. As are the people in Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* (1932), or the poor whites of *As I Lay Dying* (1930):

Laziness and a lack of ambition were only part of that Celtic-southern tradition, which good English men and Yankees deplored. Being lazy to Celts and Southerners did not mean being indolent, shiftless, slothful, and worthless; it meant being free from work, having spare time to do as they pleased, being at liberty, and enjoying their leisure. When a Celt or Southerner said that he was being lazy he was not reproaching himself but merely describing his state of comfort. He suffered no guilt when he spent his time pleasantly—hunting, fishing, dancing, drinking, gambling, fighting, or just loafing and talking. He could not understand why anyone would work when livestock could make a living for him; indeed he doubted the sanity of people who labored when they could avoid it. Nor did he see any good reason to have more than he could eat, or drink, or wear, or ride. (McWhiney 78-79)

This is a far cry from the oft-mentioned Puritan work ethic of thrift, work, and diligence. Both the New England Puritan and the Anglo-Saxon Yankee (these two could easily blend into one) frowned upon idling; one was supposed to be usefully engaged virtually all the time. You may also want to note how diametrically opposed the components of this value system are to the staple Puritan virtues or the 13 (Enlightenment) virtues described and recommended for emulation in Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*. In Franklin's "project for moral perfection" the highest virtues are *temperance* ("eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation"), *silence* ("avoid trifling conversation"), *order* ("let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time"), *frugality* ("waste nothing"), *industry*

("lose no time; be always employed in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions"), *moderation* ("avoid extremes"), and seven more (compare *The Autobiography* 485-88). Compare these core virtues with features that would typify Scotch-Irish conduct, behavior, and decision-making: wasteful hospitality, reckless indulgence in food and drink, leisurely lifestyle, a distaste for hard work, a strong tendency toward lawlessness, settlement of disagreement by violent means, impetuosity, lack of discipline, improvidence, shiftlessness, refusing to obey central authority, and a host of other anti-Puritan and anti-Nordic traits. As if the crackers of South Georgia and the English Puritans of New England had been charted and created by designers who could only think in terms of dichotomizing patterns and tendencies.

5. Some literary echoes

Owing to the fact that literature is an omnivorous medium and capable of swallowing every possible theme and subject-matter, no wonder literary references abound. Subsequently I will briefly dwell upon some scattered cultural manifestations in high or low Southern art. The first of these is a natural outcome of the fact that Celtic cultural expressiveness has tended to be macabre, grotesque, and sexually uninhibited. The literature of the South of the past two centuries supplies sufficient evidence for that. Consider, for instance, the fascinating and repelling manifestations of sex and violence in the popular writings of lusty humor of the humorists of the Old Southwest, especially *Sut Lovingood's Yarns* (1867) by George Washington Harris. We can have a kind of recognition scene as we read James T. Callow and Robert J. Reilly's comment and catalogue with the Scotch-Irish cracker figure in mind:

The Southwestern humorist . . . carefully [recorded] the society about him. A good part of this society was coarse and subliterate—a motley array of yokels, loafers, squatters, clay eaters, sharpers, and brawlers commonly labeled as poor whites. . . Southwestern humor often appears fascinatingly wild. There are orgiastic camp meetings; fights replete with gouging and biting; and such practical jokes as setting a mule on fire, breaking up a funeral procession, and cutting the face from a corpse to scare a nosy landlady. (141-42)

In the twentieth century, writers of Scotch-Irish or Scottish descent, such as Georgia back-country writer Erskine Caldwell and Mississippi's William

Faulkner, several other contemporaries, such as Flannery O'Connor, Truman Capote, Carson McCullers, William Styron, as well as a host of popular imitators may serve as obvious examples.

The “sexually uninhibited” behavior is clearly present in the various dubious and spectatorial transactions of the Lester family in Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road*, or the various doings of the Bundren family in Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*. What is most striking in these tales of the macabre is the utterly nonchalant behavior of the parents: a kind of moral nihilism emanating from the total breakdown of parental authority. Jeeter Lester keeps admiring his daughter Pearl’s “long yellow curls hanging down her back” (9) and he never for a minute realizes—or cares—that “them yellow curls” come from a biological father other than himself. “The man who was her [Pearl’s] father”—Caldwell confides—“had passed through the country one day, and had never been seen since. He had told Ada that he came from Carolina and was on his way to Texas, and that was all she knew about him” (34). Jeeter himself has sowed his wild oats; he has no idea how many children he may have fathered on how many women in the county. Neither does Dewey Dell get any help, or even advice, from her parents. What is more, her predicament—her unwanted pregnancy—is comic to everyone; indeed, to the drug clerk it is a wonderful joke. As one reviewer commented on *Tobacco Road* ten years after it was published, “[t]he adolescent, almost idiotic gravity of Mr. Caldwell’s characters produces instantaneous laughter and their sexual adventures are treated with an irreverence that verges upon the robust ribaldry of a burlesque show” (qtd. in Smith 46).

The success of Caldwell’s novels of the back-country South inspired a lot of imitation, and “the paperback publishers of the 1950s were quick to capitalize on the image of the South which Caldwell had established, and the image of backwoods characters who live life at a very basic and elemental level . . .” (Crider 47). Backwoods novels, Christopher D. Geist contends, centered on the “earthy humor, the primitive passions and quaint ways of Southern hill folk. These ‘folk’ were libidinous, raucous, and illiterate, and the stories involved cockfighting, moonshining, prostitution, gambling, and general depravity” (863). The contents of these digest-size paperbacks were the problems of respective sharecropping families, and the covers of the cheap editions included suggestive images of lustful women and “the primitive passions and quaint ways of Southern hill folk” (Crider 49). The titles were standardized, and some typical formulations on the cover were as follows: *Backwoods Hussy*, *Backwoods Tramp*, *Girl Out Back*, *Hill*

Girl, Mountain Girl, Back-Country Wench, Swamp Babe, and the like. There was, inevitably, also a novel, published in 1953, with this title: *Cracker Girl*.

The usefulness of finding out more about Celtic aspects in American culture actually means that we are talking about something that is worth sorting out, something that can lend us new insights and new filters in understanding the American literary culture. For instance, it took me about a decade and a half to find out about the real meaning of certain cultural hints in the literature of the American South.

The cultural consumer, therefore, is likely to bring a different reading to William Faulkner after he learns that each of Faulkner's three great tragic families—Compson, McCaslin, and Sutpen—is of Scottish Highland ancestry. (Within an American framework, that is, once in America, the Highland Scotch are accepted as indistinguishable from the Lowland Scotch, that is, from the Scotch-Irish.) We understand many of Thomas Sutpen's strange acts and decisions—his “oddities”—better after we realize that in his character Faulkner wanted to create the image of a “young Celt from the provinces” who never grows up (Vanderwerken 69-74). He fails to grow up in the sense that the inadequacy of his mind to sort out his experience fails to lead him to change his thinking. When Sutpen tells the story of his childhood and of his meager mountain heritage to General Compson, he recalls vague memories of the Appalachian mountain range and about his mother, a “mountain woman, a Scottish woman who, so he told Grandfather, never did quite learn to speak English” (*Absalom* 195)—likely she spoke Gaelic—apparently provided what little family energy the Sutpens possessed. The Sutpen relocation to the Mississippi River is a profound dislocation for the bewildered and culturally confused boy in time as well as space. But what is essential at this point is that in his confidence in his own self-sufficiency, Sutpen is a mountaineer to the end. Indeed we can fathom young Sutpen's cultural confusion in light of his Scotch-Irish heritage.

All in all we can safely claim that the reader who is unaware of this European dimension of Faulkner's fictional puzzle, is seriously disadvantaged. Faulkner hands over to the reader a cultural mix that can be appropriated only through learning the iconography and image bank of the Celtic frame of reference. Or simply of Celtic ways. “No matter where Sutpen's ‘design’ to transform himself from ‘cracker’ to aristocrat takes him, he will never ‘housebreak’ himself from his Celtic heritage” (Vanderwerken 74).

One of Sutpen's memorable "oddities," his wrestling bouts with his servants (described as the "wild Negroes") clearly indicate this social and intellectual deficiency. We are actually dealing with fighting in the American backcountry where it came to be called "rough and tumble," a savage combat between two or more males. We are immediately reminded of the humorists of the old Southwest from the second quarter of the nineteenth century in whose works—actually a body of various subliterate forms and a vital source for Twain—we can read about brutal physical clashes, such as fights replete with gouging and biting. For instance, in Georgia native Augustus Baldwin Longstreet's short story "The Fight" (1833), which represents the frontier at its worst, the reader may be easily put off by the barbarity of a "fair fight" resulting in the loss of an ear, a cheek, a finger, and a nose. While literary historians often describe this coarse and subliterate society (identified as "poor whites" and "white trash") with an attempt at sociological precision, the ethnic dimension is often missing. Thus we are left in the dark as to their immigrant origins, although it would not be wide of the mark to guess that it is the Scotch-Irish immigrants and their descendents we are likely to encounter in these individuals.

According to McDonald, by the end of the eighteenth century, when the first US census was taken (1790), "Celts dominated the interior from Pennsylvania southward, ranging in various areas from three-fourth to nearly a hundred percent of the population" (1131). Thus the poor whites Longstreet was writing about represented a cracker culture; the local characters he ridiculed in his works were unmistakably Scotch-Irish people. Southern historian McWhiney adds that by 1860 they far outnumbered the combined total of all other white Southerners and their culture dominated the region, especially Appalachia (*Cracker* xiii).

One of the typical views about cracker culture has been reflected in allegations to the effect that it is "hostile to literacy" (Sowell 19). This actually refers, in significant communicative transactions, to the cultural preference for oral rather than written expression. Crackers have been handicapped—asserts McWhiney—in defending themselves for various reasons, including the traditional emphasis of their culture on oral rather than written expression. "It is difficult to conceive of a Cracker," he says, "jotting off an essay in defense of his ways, as a Northerner might do. Other than a check, a Cracker is unlikely to write anything more than words to a tune. But his songs—heard over hundreds of country radio stations—both defend and justify his traditions" (*Cracker* xv). This and the strong Scotch-Irish preference for yarnspinning and listening to reading and writing

justifies the question whether, for instance, Faulkner's narrated storylines, normally associated with favored modernist techniques and strategies such as "multiplicity of perspectives," "polyphony," "pluralized narrative," "multiple narration," the "polyphonic novel," "several contesting voices representing a variety of positions" were not so much prompted by the conventions of Celtic folk tradition as by modernist technical and theoretical advances. It does not sound too sweeping an assertion to claim that Faulkner's experiments with multiple narration of the modernist kind can be traced back to Scotch-Irish sources.

Among scattered minor literary echoes two will be mentioned here. The first is not a surprising choice: Ellen Glasgow in *Barren Ground* keeps returning to the fact that the forebears of Dorinda Oakley were "sturdy Presbyterian stock." As early as page 5, Glasgow mentions the "stalwart farmers of Scotch-Irish descent" and "the great Scotch-Irish families of the upper Valley of Virginia" (5). We understand her affirmative attitude toward the Scotch-Irish more if we also know that she herself was a descendant of immigrants from Celtic lands.

The second brief mention will concern Walt Whitman. In various descriptions of Scotch-Irish traits, as mentioned earlier, the special focus on non-aquisitive, physically pleasant, pleasurable, indolent manifestations of behavior are given preference over ambition, achievement, and practical result. Being free from work, spending time pleasantly and/or idly, enjoying the condition of not having to labor, spending one's time pleasantly and/or idly are considered not merely normal but desirable. A Celtic person is usually not ashamed to *loaf* (or *loafe*), that is, to loiter aimlessly or lazily. Whitman in *Song of Myself* describes this blissful—and perhaps also contemplative—existence with perfect mimicry. Read lines 4 and 5:

I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

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Notes

¹ Can we imagine what a genuine Scotch-Irish person looks like? H. L. Klevar, Erskine Caldwell's bibliographer, comes to our aid: "A freckled face, red hair, and laconic manner spoke for his [Caldwell's] Scotch-Irish ancestry" (61).

² In Samuel Johnson's dictionary of 1755, a cracker was defined as "a noisy, boasting fellow." This dictionary definition would be correct if we were not, in the present context, interested in a different meaning.

³ That Gerald's Irish is up at the sight of a Protestant Celt is understandable. What is difficult to identify with is the view that the Irish-Irish (the indigenous, Catholic Irish) played such a big role in the peculiar institution of the South. The Celtic contribution to the South indubitably came from the Scotch-Irish. Indeed, one can sense a game of rivalry taking place on the pages of the novel that has by now passed into folklore.

⁴ *Beinn* is a Gaelic word for "mountain" + *in* (*een*) is a diminutive suffix = "little mountain" (197).

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